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Why and When Leader Humility Promotes Constructive Voice: A Crossover of Energy Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to build a moderate mediation model to delineate the effects of leader humility on employee constructive voice behavior based on conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model. Specifically, when a leader behaves with humility, the follower will be more likely to feel they receive psychological resources from their interactions with the leader (i.e., relational energy), and thus engage in more constructive voice behavior. In addition, this energizing effect only occurs when the leader is perceived as having higher apparent sincerity by their subordinates.

Design/methodology/approach: The research hypotheses of this study were empirically tested using multi-timepoint and multi-source (i.e., supervisors and subordinates) survey data in China. Study 1, based on data from 449 subordinates and 88 immediate supervisors, was conducted to test the proposed mediation effect. Study 2, based on data from 185 subordinates and 50 immediate supervisors, was conducted to replicate the findings of Study 1 and test the integrated model.

Findings: The results of Study 1 support the proposed mediation effect that leader humility positively predicts followers' constructive voice behavior via boosting followers' relational energy. The results of Study 2 replicate the findings of Study 1, and further indicate that leader humility is only positively related to perceived relational energy when a leader is perceived as having higher apparent sincerity by their subordinates.

Practical implications: This paper provides detailed instructions for business practitioners. First, given that employee constructive voice behavior is related to employee relational energy and is beneficial to organizations, leaders are encouraged to behave with humility when interacting with their subordinates. Second, from perspective of human resource management, well-designed training programs can be used to help leaders to develop leader

humility. Third, the findings of this paper call attention to a potential risk for humble leaders. Organizations should educate leaders on the potential negative consequences of false humility and encourage leader humility that will appear sincerity.

Originality/value: Overall, drawing on conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model this paper reveals that boosting relational energy is a mechanism via which humble leaders can shape employees' voice behavior. Second, by examining the moderation effect of apparent sincerity of leaders from followers' perspective, this paper suggests an actor–recipient perspective to identify the boundaries of the energizing mechanism. Third, the findings of this paper add to the knowledge on voice research by highlighting an additional source of energy for employee constructive voice behavior.

Keywords: humble leadership, perceived relational energy, apparent sincerity, employee constructive voice behavior

Why and When Leader Humility Promotes Constructive Voice: A Crossover of Energy Perspective

Leader humility denotes behaviors that “emerges in social contexts and connotes a manifested willingness [of the leader] to view [themselves] accurately, an appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions, and teachability” (Owens and Hekman, 2016, p. 1088). Compared with conventional top-down approaches to leadership such as empowering leadership (e.g., Srivastava et al., 2006), leader humility is characterized by a leader’s appreciation of knowledge and worth beyond themselves and represents a bottom-up approach to leadership because it means the leader will be less self-interested, and more open to followers’ idea and perspectives, and to spotlighting the strengths and contributions of others (Owens and Hekman, 2016; Owens et al., 2015). Supporting the organizational benefits of these leadership behaviors, leader humility has not only been positively associated with employees’ in-role performance (e.g., Ou et al., 2014; Owens and Hekman, 2012, 2016; Owens et al., 2013), but also proactive behavior (i.e., self-initiated and future-oriented behavior aiming to improve work environment) (Parker et al., 2006), as reported by several studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2018)

The current research on leader humility has suggested that leader humility can promote employees’ proactive performance due to its impact on subordinates’ sense of competence. As humble leaders tend to recognize others’ strengths, and prioritize learning and growth (Hu et al., 2018; Owen and Hekman, 2012), they establish psychological safety (Hu et al., 2018) and develop followers’ self-efficacy (Bharanitharan et al., 2018), allowing followers to feel capable of taking initiatives and challenging the status quo (Parker et al., 2010). This perspective however only considers the mechanism on employees’ perceived capabilities for proactivity and ignores the importance of energy to support employees’ proactivity for bringing about changes. Being positively energized at work generates positive

feelings and emotional arousal to increase employees' creative and proactive thoughts (Ghitulescu, 2018). Being energetic allows employees to concentrate on solving work-related problems and invest physical resources to realize organizational changes (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Further, as bringing about changes takes time and effort to overcome potential obstacles such as resistance from others, employees need to pay extra energy in order to make things happen (Parker et al., 2010).

In this study, drawing on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and crossover of resources model (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we argue that humble leaders can actually transmit energy as resources from resource caravans to subordinates via a crossover process, "a dyadic interindividual transmission of psychological states and experiences" (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 108) and thus sustain subordinates' proactive behavior. Specifically, we proposed that leader humility, characterized by its relational orientation and serves as a relationship builder (Nielsen et al., 2013), can boost subordinates' relational energy (i.e., a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness and fulfillment generated from interpersonal interactions) (Owens et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018), which in turn, sustains employees' behavior for bringing about changes (Parker et al., 2010). To examine our hypotheses, we focus on subordinates' constructive voice, a type of proactive behavior involving employee's communication of ideas, suggestions, and concerns about work-related issues aimed at change and improvement (Morrison, 2011, 2014), for several reasons. First, constructive voice is inherently proactive and challenging oriented which helps improve organizational processes and decision-making quality (e.g., Wang et al., 2016). Second, because of its challenging nature, engagement in voice behavior consumes more energy than conventional, affiliative type of OCB (Detert and Burris, 2007; Detert and Edmondson, 2011), highlighting the "energized to" process. Third, voice represents an upward influence, which is in line with the bottom-up approach represented by leader humility. We thus

propose that leader humility will be positively associated with subordinates' relational energy and thus their constructive voice behavior.

Nevertheless, we suggest that leaders may not boost followers' relational energy by simply showing humble behaviors as the crossover transmission from leaders to followers would be undermined if subordinates have questions about the underlying motivations of leaders' behavior. As followers' discretionary judgments on the interactions between themselves and leaders depend on their perception of the sincerity of leaders (Owens and Hekman, 2012), we argue that followers' perceived apparent sincerity of leader, meaning the perceived authenticity, genuineness, and integrity of leaders' behavior (Ferris et al., 2008), can moderate the relationship between leader humility and follower's perceived relational energy. When a leader has a high level of sincerity, followers tend to perceive that the leader's expression of humility is authentic, enjoy their interactions with the leader, and experience higher levels of relational energy. However, when a leader has a low level of sincerity, followers question the leader's motivations in showing humility, and doubt their relationship quality with the leader, which prevents them from experiencing relational energy. Figure 1 presents our conceptual model.

 Insert Figure 1 about here

Our study offers three major contributions to the literature. First, drawing on conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model specifically, we uncover the psychological process of relational energy acquisition, through which leader humility is related to employee proactive behavior, expanding the understanding why humble leaders are able to cultivate proactive employees. Second, by examining the moderation effect of apparent sincerity of leaders from followers' perspective, our study highlights the relational, interactional nature of leader humility as how or the manner leaders interact with followers

can shape the impact of leader humility on relational energy, providing a different angle to understand how followers' perception of leaders can shape the impact of leader humility. Finally, our findings add to the knowledge on voice research by highlighting an additional source of energy for employee constructive voice behavior. In previous studies, positive affect has been commonly considered an "energized to" pathway of proactive behavior (e.g., Parker et al., 2010); however, our research on leader humility and perceived relational energy represents a different source of and pathway to energizing employees to engage in constructive voice behavior, which is an under-investigated mechanism of proactivity (Parker et al., 2010).

Theory and Hypotheses

Conservation of Resources Theory and Crossover of Resources Model

Energy can be broadly defined as the resources that increase employees' capacity for action and motivation, enabling them to do their work and attain their goals (Owens et al., 2016, p. 35). According to conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), energy, like other resources, need to be protected, gained, and preserved. Based on the crossover of resources model (Hobfoll et al., 2018), as resources "do not exist individually but travel in packs, or caravans" (p.107), energy can be transmitted through an interpersonal process of crossover within social and organizational contexts. Specifically, energy experiences a mechanism of resource exchange in resource caravans following an interaction between individuals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The positive feelings and behaviors expressed by one partner energize the other partner. Typically, an illustration is the crossover of resources between leaders and followers (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which describes supervisors, by behaving in certain ways, exchange important resources such as energy with subordinates to assist them in organizational performance.

In line with the crossover of resources model and focusing on the meaning of energy in a relational context specifically, Owens et al. (2016) develop the concept of relational energy by arguing that employees can acquire relational energy from interpersonal experiences at work (Owens et al., 2016). At work, individuals can endogenously resource their own energy from multiple sources such as coworkers, leaders, or team members (Owens et al., 2016). Among various relational sources, leaders can be critical relational energizers who transfers a set of resources to followers because of their direct influence on employee work functioning (Owens et al., 2016). Further, having higher relational energy helps subordinates demonstrate personal initiative at work and exert extra effort to challenge the status quo because while acting proactively depletes energy resources (Sonnentag, 2003), the transference of energy resources from interaction partners replenishes the energy pool, and provides employees with further motivation and the ability to act.

In addition, the foundation of crossover of relational energy emphasizes the presence of favorable interaction experiences as a prerequisite of energy activation (Owens et al., 2016). Thus, the quality of interpersonal interactions affects the individual's response to energizing stimuli. A key factor that directly determines the quality of interpersonal interactions between leaders and employees is authenticity. Authenticity and humility are intertwined. According to Owens and Hekman (2012), genuine compliments from a leader motivate followers to act, while feigned humility causes increased distrust and reduces the respect of followers for the leader. Therefore, leader humility is better received as an energy stimulus if it is perceived by followers as sincere. Based on above reasoning, we now provide arguments to develop our hypotheses.

Leader Humility, Perceived Relational Energy, and Constructive Voice

During workplace social interactions, humble leaders can influence subordinates' energy through a series of interpersonal processes of crossover.

First, a humble leader can establish a positive atmosphere at work and serve as an energy stimulus that can enhance followers' relational energy. Humble leaders tend to be open to their own limitations and admitting problems (Hu et al., 2018). Such modest view of self (Owens et al., 2015) leads humble leaders to create a positive workplace atmosphere by taking notice of subordinates' strengths, expressing willingness to learn from subordinates, being open to different opinions, and even accepting criticism and advice that contradicts their own views (Owens and Hekman, 2016). The positive affect and behaviors demonstrated by humble leaders in turn reinforce positive psychology in followers (Owens and Hekman, 2016) such that followers experience a more relaxed mindset, and feel motivated to work (Owens et al., 2016), resulting in the followers being positively energized (e.g., having positive feelings and feeling a heightened sense of engagement with work) (Owens et al., 2016).

Second, by inviting followers to contribute, frequently praising them, and actively listening to their opinions, a humble leader behaves in such a way of showing respect and appreciation to followers, thus energizing followers via a cognitive stimulation mechanism. Humble leaders' appreciation and compliments of follower contributions tends to ensure followers experience the self-congruent cognition that they are valued at work (Owens and Hekman, 2016), and thus feel energized due to a sense of volition (Ryan and Deci, 2008). In addition, we view leaders' exerting humility as a vital means of fulfilling followers' cognitive need for competence at work. For example, humble leaders may request help from followers (Owens and Hekman, 2016), and by responding to this request, followers are given the opportunity to make contribution to the workplace. The need fulfillment enhances followers' intrinsic motivation and boosting positive attitudes (e.g., Deci and Ryan, 2010), suggesting that followers acquire an increased level of relational energy from humble leaders.

Third, we theorize that through a series of interpersonal exchanges, humble leaders can establish a behavioral model that helps energize followers through a process of social contagion. This is in line with Owens and Hekman's (2016) perspective of "leader humility social contagion" (p. 1090), which argues that humble leaders have a critical influence in shaping how followers should behave. When leaders model humble behaviors, followers tend to emulate similar behaviors such as continuous learning, keeping open-minded, and being constructive (Owens and Hekman, 2016), which helps followers buffer loss-related events and feel energetic at work. In addition, humble leaders set up a behavioral model of making endeavor to remedy self-defects (Hu et al., 2018). In such situations, followers see humble leaders giving away some of their power and valuing the collective interest over personal status, and as a result, the followers tend to follow a logic of cooperative and other-oriented interaction (Owens and Hekman, 2016). Such favorable interactions are in turn transferred into relational energy, which motivates employees to engage positively at work (Owens et al., 2016).

Fourth, we suggest that humble leaders provide relational energy to followers by significantly enhancing exchange quality between leader and subordinate, which provides the necessary resources (Wang et al., 2005) and legitimate personal growth and development of followers (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Expressing humility helps leaders see followers' strengths and skills, which in turn facilitates a more realistic allocation of followers' personal resources toward completing work tasks (Owens et al., 2013). Further, leader humility fosters supportive leader–follower relationships, which allows the follower continuous access to support from the leader. In line with above reasoning, Wang et al. (2018) have reported a positive association between leader humility and relational energy of subordinates.

Drawing on the conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model, we further expect that experiencing perceived relational energy will in turn motivate

employees to engage in constructive voice behavior. Constructive voice behavior as a type of proactive behavior aiming to challenge the status quo is a behavior that requires employees to exert a greater amount of energy to perform beyond the requirements of their work role (Dyne et al., 2003). Nevertheless, we argue that the energy pool can be significantly replenished by relational energy during the crossover process to inspire employees to speak up.

First, we propose that employees with perceived relational energy are more capable of and willing to monitor the work environment actively and identify issues about which they have something to potentially say, which Detert and Edmondson (2011) identify as a latent voice episode. While in the above process, employees spend more cognitive resources to pay attention to work-related issues and problems or opportunities that might be important to share (Morrison, 2011, 2014), being energetic has been found to widen individuals' attention scope, allowing them to be aware of more information. In particular, having relational energy acquired from favorable interpersonal interactions at work implies that employees are worthy of attention and accepted by the organization as an insider (e.g., Owens et al., 2016). As such, the relational energy gaining process generates employee commitment and responsibility, and leads to employees prioritizing the interests of the organization, monitoring the organizational environment, and speaking up (Morrison, 2011).

Second, because the crossover of resource model emphasizes favorable interpersonal interactions resulting in resource exchanges, we suggest that employees who are energized during interpersonal work interactions will interpret that their interaction partner is actively socializing and willing to communicate (e.g., Oc and Bashshur, 2013). Thus, they are more likely to consolidate the favorable relational context by spending more time and effort to consider and take care of others (Morrison, 2011), which leads to their actively making suggestions to improve the status quo. Moreover, employees usually evaluate gains and costs

prior to speaking up (Detert and Burris, 2007) because they are concerned about damaging their relationship with their supervisors if they do not speak up in the correct manner (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2014). Such consideration on maintaining relationships expends self-regulation energy (Finkel et al., 2006). Given that a leader is a major relational energizer at work (Owens et al., 2016), having relational energy from leaders can provide powerful cues that employees can be motivated to raise concerns and suggestions without worrying about being viewed negatively, damaging their work relationships, or causing embarrassment to or retaliation of the leader. As a result, they are more likely to engage in constructive voice behavior. Following our elaboration above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Leader humility is positively related to followers' relational energy, which in turn, is positively related to followers' constructive voice. Followers' relational energy mediates the relationship between leader humility and constructive voice.

Moderating Role of Perceived Apparent Sincerity of Leader

Followers' discretionary judgments on the interactions between themselves and leaders have been suggested to depend on their perception of the sincerity of leaders (Owens and Hekman, 2012). The apparent sincerity of a leader is described as leaders' being perceived as honest, authentic, and genuine in their words and actions (Ferris et al., 2012). The trustworthiness and sincerity of leaders are deeply intertwined with leader humility (Owens and Hekman, 2012), and have implications for the influence of an individual's motivations and reactions in social relationships (Ferris et al., 2012). Therefore, in line with conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model in which relational energy is rooted, we argue that leader humility is more likely to result in enhanced relational energy of subordinates when these subordinates perceive that the leaders are sincere, that is, when

humble leaders provide honest substantive compliments, describe true follower strengths, and genuinely appreciate the contributions of others (Owens and Hekman, 2012).

Prior literature examining relational energy suggests that the relational experience employees have with their leaders influences their feelings and generates relational energy (Owens et al., 2016). Apparent sincerity enables individuals to act with subtlety and genuineness, enhancing effect of influence. When a leader's humble behavior is sincere and authentic, followers tend to evaluate the leader's humble behavior positively without attributing the leader humility as an impression management tool or a tactic used to mask the leader's ulterior motives (Ferris et al., 2012). For example, followers feel that praise from the leader is real and comfortable when the leader gives genuine compliments rather than flattery or empty praise (Owens and Hekman, 2012). As a result, followers are more likely to be energized when a leader's humble behaviors are perceived as sincere and authentic because the sincerity of the leader's compliments makes followers truly believe that they are capable, valuable, and respected in their interactions with the leader, and that they can develop good relationships with the leader to access the source of energy continuously.

In contrast, the presence of humility by leaders could be perceived as instrumental or false (Oc et al., 2015). **Leaders engage in such false humility which is accompanied with contempt and suspicion can be detrimental (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Specifically, if followers believe that leader's expression of humility has ulterior motives or is dishonest, the leader fails to genuinely represent his or her social category as a "humble leader" (Lehman et al., 2018), which will decrease the influence of the leader's behaviors (Ferris et al., 2008). In this circumstance, followers question the leader's humble behavior and do not feel that they are truly capable and valuable at work.** In addition, the followers do not feel respected when being consulted by the leaders and cannot establish a good relationship with the leader either. As a result, followers are not energized by leader humility because the low level of apparent

sincerity of leader inhibits the effect of leader humility on follower's perceived relational energy. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The perceived apparent sincerity of a leader moderates the relationships between leader humility and relational energy in such a way that the relationships will be stronger when follower perceived higher than lower apparent sincerity of their leaders.

Integrated Model

Based on the theoretical and empirical arguments outlined above, we propose an integrated model to produce a more comprehensive understanding of why and how leader humility energizes followers to engage in constructive voice behavior. We anticipate that the indirect effect leader humility on employee constructive voice behavior via perceived relational energy is contingent on the perceived apparent sincerity of the leader. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

H3: The indirect effect of leader humility on employee constructive voice behavior via relational energy is conditional on followers' perceived apparent sincerity of leader, such that the indirect effect is stronger when perceived apparent sincerity of leader is high, but weakens when perceived apparent sincerity of leader is low.

Method

Study 1

Participants and Procedures

As the current study focuses on the effect of humble leadership on subordinates' voice behaviors in workplace, the universe or the population of the study includes employees (i.e., subordinates and their immediate supervisors) in business organizations. Large company with different levels of authority was selected to fit in the current study. The authors investigated the above research questions by examining the responses of subordinates and their

supervisors from a large pharmacy manufacturing company in Southern China. The authors approached more than 600 full-time employees. Those employees were from multiple departments which helped avoid sample selection bias (Berk, 1983). Data collection took place in three waves. Specifically, the participants completed the subordinate survey of Time 1 (including measures of leader humility and control variables) during their work break. Two weeks later, the participants completed the subordinate survey of Time 2 (including measures of perceived relational energy) following the same procedure. A further two weeks later, the same participants forwarded the supervisor questionnaire (i.e., Time 3) to their immediate supervisors to rate constructive voice behaviors of those participants.

Finally, four hundred and forty-nine respondents (449 subordinates and 88 immediate supervisors) completed both surveys, with a final response rate of 74.83%. The average age of participants was 29.57 years, and 46.1% were male. On average, they have been working with their current supervisor for 4.56 years. The respondents varied in educational levels, but most held a bachelor's degree or higher (74.4%).

Measures

To ensure the validity and appropriateness of all the scales in the Chinese context, we employed the translation and back-translation procedure recommended by Brislin (1980) before we sent the questionnaires to the respondents. Unless otherwise specified, all the items were measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

Leader humility. We assessed leader humility with a nine-item scale developed by Owens and Hekman (2016). A sample item is “My immediate supervisor actively seeks feedback, even if it is critical”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .91.

Perceived relational energy. A five-item scale constructed by Owens et al. (2016) was used to measure this variable. A sample items is “I feel invigorated when I interact with my immediate supervisor”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .89.

Employee constructive voice behavior. The immediate supervisors were asked to provide responses about their subordinates' constructive voice behavior using Maynes and Podsakoff's (2014) five-item scale. A Sample item is "He/she often speaks up with recommendations about how to fix work-related problems". The Cronbach's alpha value was .91.

Control variables. We control for effects of employees' demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, work tenure, and education level) following previous studies (e.g., Owens et al., 2013). We controlled for employees' general self-efficacy as those higher in self-efficacy tend to be competent to make constructive voice (e.g., Detert and Burris, 2007; Parker et al., 2010). Self-efficacy was measured with a ten-item scale from Riggs et al. (1994). The Cronbach's alpha value was .83. We also controlled for work engagement because it represents general energy at work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and has been found to predict proactivity at work (Sonnentag, 2003; Wu et al., 2016). Work engagement was measured with the 18-item scale developed by Rich et al. (2010). The Cronbach's alpha value was .95.

Results

To verify the factor structure and distinctiveness of our survey measures, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using Mplus 7.3 (Muthén and Muthén 2010). Following the recommended parameters to sample size ratio for estimation (1:5) (Bentler & Chou, 1987), we included measurement items of key variables as observed indicators in the tests. The hypothesized three-factor model provided a reasonably good fit to the data: χ^2 [df = 149] = 512.34, $p < .001$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .94; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .03. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for our variables are displayed in Table 1. Coefficient alphas are located on the diagonal in parentheses.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Although all variables in our study were conceptualized and measured at the individual level, there was a nested nature of the data (i.e., a single supervisor provided behavioral assessments for two or more subordinates). The ICC(1) for employee constructive voice behavior was 59.50% and therefore, suggests that there was substantial variance in the outcome variable, warranting the use of multilevel modelling for analyzing the data. We tested our hypothesized model using multilevel structural equation modelling (SEM) within Mplus.

Table 2 presents the results. We found that leader humility has a positive association with relational energy ($B = .65, S.E. = .11, p = .000$), which in turn, has a positive association with constructive voice behavior ($B = .29, S.E. = .10, p = .006$). We estimated the indirect effect from leader humility to constructive voice behavior via relational energy in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén, 2004) and found a significant effect (*indirect effect* = .19, $S.E. = .09$, 95% C.I. = .03 to .35; *direct effect* = .01, $S.E. = .11$, 95% C.I. = -.21 to .23), supporting Hypothesis 1.

 Insert Table 2 about here

Results of Study 1 support our proposal that a humble leader can be an energizer that increases subordinates' relational energy, and thus promotes subordinates' constructive voice behavior. However, there are several limitations of this study. First, although we included several controls to bolster confidence in our theoretical model, other important factors, such as job characteristics and top-down leadership styles, that have been found to shape employees' voice behavior have not been taken into account. Second, data in Study 1 were from one company in a specific industry. Whether the same finding can be observed in other

settings is unknown. Third, we did not examine the moderation effect of perceived apparent sincerity of leaders in this study. As such, we conducted a second study to provide a more complete view of our research.

Study 2

Participants and Procedures

The participants were 185 employees of a large manufacturing company in heavy industry in Southern China organized into 50 work teams, thus providing 50 supervisors for this sample. We followed the same approach as for Study 1 to collect the data. The response rate was 74%. The average age of participants was 35.44 years ($SD = 7.79$), and 34.6% were female. The average organizational tenure with their current supervisor was 14.42 years ($SD = 9.34$), and most participants (34.6%) held a high-school degree or higher. Participants included employees from multiple departments.

Measures

Leader humility, perceived relational energy, and employee constructive voice behavior were measured with the same scales used in Study 1.

Apparent sincerity of leader. Apparent sincerity of leader was measured by subordinates using the three-item scale adapted from Ferris et al. (2005). Sample item includes “When communicating with others, my immediate supervisor tries to be genuine in what he/she says and does”. The Cronbach’s alpha value was .74.

Control variables. As in the previous study, we measured and controlled basic demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, education, and tenure). We controlled role-breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) but not general self-efficacy in this study because RBSE describes the extent to which people feel confident to act proactively (Parker, 1998) and is more relevant to employee constructive voice behavior. We used four items with highest factor loadings from Parker (1998) to measure this construct. The Cronbach’s alpha value was .80. We included

work engagement as a control variable because of the same reason stated in Study 1. The Cronbach's alpha value was .93. Decision-making autonomy refers to the freedom and flexibility to make independent decisions at work (Gonzalez-Mule et al., 2014). Given that a leader is a major relational energizer (Owens et al., 2016), it is reasonable to expect that decision-making autonomy delegated to a subordinate affects the subordinate's perceived relational energy. Empirically, decision-making autonomy has been linked to different forms of proactive behavior, including constructive voice behavior (Wu et al., 2018). We used three items developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). The Cronbach's alpha value was .81. Finally, given that our focus is on the effect of bottom-up leader humility, we included a top-down form of empowering leadership as a control variable. Empowering leadership encourages employees to develop self-control (Vecchio et al., 2010, p. 531) and has been positively linked with employee constructive voice. A ten-item scale developed by Vecchio et al. (2010) was adapted to measure empowering leadership. The Cronbach's alpha value was .87.

We also controlled for the moderating effect of subordinate power distance orientation because leader humility can be negative if a subordinate prefers leaders that have a flawless and highly confident self-presentation (Hu et al., 2018). A seven-item scale from Brockner et al. (2001) was used to measure employee power distance orientation. The Cronbach's alpha value was .73.

Results

The hypothesized four-factor model, including leader humility, apparent sincerity of leader, perceived relational energy, and employee constructive voice behavior, provided a reasonably good fit to the data ($\chi^2_{[df=203]} = 365.69, p < .001$; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .92; TLI = .91; SRMR = .05). The results support the discriminant validity of our measures. The measurement model comparisons are presented in Table 3.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for our variables are displayed in Table 4. Coefficient alphas are located on the diagonal in parentheses.

 Insert Table 4 about here

The ICC(1) for employee constructive voice behavior was 0.33, suggesting that 33% of variance in employee constructive voice behavior is explained by group membership. Thus, we used the same modeling approach as Study 1 to analyze the data. Table 5 presents the results of the proposed moderated-mediation model estimated in Mplus.

Leader humility at Time 1 was positively associated with relational energy at Time 2 ($B = .37, S.E. = .10, p = .000$); relational energy at Time 2 had a positive effect on constructive voice at Time 3 ($B = .27, S.E. = .11, p = .014$). The results further revealed that relational energy significantly mediates the association between leader humility and constructive voice behavior (*indirect effect* = .10, $S.E. = .05$, 95% C.I. = .002 to .19; *direct effect* = .26, $S.E. = .19$, 95% C.I. = -.11 to .63), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Table 5 also shows a significant moderating effect of apparent sincerity of leader ($B = .18, S.E. = .08, p = .029$) on the association between leader humility and relational energy. To aid interpretation, we plotted the interaction effect in Figure 2 with slopes for high or low (i.e., +1 and -1 S.D. from mean) of perceived apparent sincerity of leader (Aiken et al., 1991). The simple slope between leader humility and perceived relational energy was positive and significant when perceived apparent sincerity of leader was high (simple slope = .49, $t = 5.51, p < .000$), and non-significant when perceived apparent sincerity of leader was low (simple slope = .13, $t = 1.43, n.s.$). This finding is in line with the pattern described in Hypothesis 2,

but further indicates that employees are only energized by their relationships with leaders when they perceive the leaders are sincere.

We then used Mplus to test Hypothesis 3 in an integrative fashion at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator (i.e., perceived apparent sincerity of leader). When perceived apparent sincerity of leader was high, the mediated model was significant (*conditional indirect effect* = .19, *S.E.* = .13, 95% C.I. = .01 to .55). However, when perceived apparent sincerity of leader was low, the mediated model was not significant (*conditional indirect effect* = .16, *S.E.* = .12, 95% C.I. = -.01 to .49). The index of moderated mediation was likewise significant (*Index* = .06 *S.E.* = .04, 95% C.I. = .001 to .14). The results provide full support for Hypothesis 3.

 Insert Table 5, Figures 2 about Here

General Discussion

In the past decade, organizational researchers have made distinctions between the non-traditional leadership approach of leader humility and other leadership styles (e.g., Owens and Hekman, 2016). Recently, there has been growing research interest in leader humility and its beneficial influence in employees' proactive performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2018). The findings of our two studies reaffirm the extant literature that leader humility creates employee proactive behaviors via a relational energy mechanism, and further indicate that humble leaders can boost the relational energy of their followers only when their followers perceive that they are sincere. Our research makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature.

Theoretical Implications

A first key contribution of our study is that, drawing on an overarching and well-established conservation of resources theory and crossover of resources model, we uncover

and specify the critical psychological process of relational energy acquisition, through which leader humility promotes employee proactive behavior (i.e., constructive voice behavior). Based on extant literature, we argued that a humble leader legitimates the process of development and adaptability of followers (Owens & Hekman, 2012), energizing them with psychological resources that lead to more constructive voice. In contrast to previous research that mainly focuses on capability as the mechanism linking leader humility and employees' proactivity (e.g., Chen et al., 2018), by identifying relational energy as a mediating mechanism, our study provides additional understanding of the reason why leader humility can promote follower proactivity. Altogether, these findings thus suggest that leader humility can promote follower proactivity via "can do" and "energized to" pathways (Parker et al., 2010).

Second, our study extends the extant literature on leader humility by examining the contingency of the perceived sincerity of the leader's humility from followers' perspective and highlights the energy creation from high-quality connections at work. To date, the investigation of boundary conditions from followership perspective has been ignored in leader humility research. This is an important perspective because, in leader humility research, followers are often in a spotlighting position and their perception on leader behavior of being humble will function as a critical moderator (Owens and Hekman, 2012). In our study, by exploring the moderating role of follower perceived sincerity of leaders, we directly focus on followers' perception of leaders' behavior and found that the manner, or how leaders interact with followers can shape the relationship between leader humility and relational energy. Moreover, while past research on leader humility has often assumed that leader humility is positive in nature (e.g., Hu et al., 2018), we suggest that it is defective to consider leader humility as merely genuine to capture the nuances of outcomes, and that "false humility" or "instrumental humility" (Owens and Hekman, 2012, p. 798) should be

considered in understanding the effects of leader humility. This suggests that the manner in which leaders express their humility might be more important in leaders influencing their followers than expressing humility *ipso facto*. Thus, our examination on the moderating effect of perceived apparent sincerity of leader contributes to the literature not only by identifying another boundary condition, but also by suggesting the value of employing an actor–recipient perspective to understand the effectiveness of leader humility. This topic merits further investigation.

Third, our study complements leadership and proactivity research by emphasizing the under-investigated mechanism of perceived relational energy, illustrating a new process of leader influence (Owens et al., 2016). Previous research has argued that increased energy can be attained through social interactions (Fritz et al., 2011), but the mechanisms by which the process occurs are seldom directly tested (Owens et al., 2016). For example, previous studies have attempted to use enhanced self-efficacy and job autonomy to capture the individual-oriented and task-oriented approaches through which employees are energized to sustain positive work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012). Rather, our study controlled these relevant factors and directly investigated the nature of social energy exchange (i.e., the construct of relational energy) and the unique effect of leader humility on the outcomes. This makes our paper having a stronger empirical contribution as previous research on leader humility did not rule out effects from other forms of leadership (e.g., empowering leadership) or other non-leadership factors (e.g., job autonomy) when examining the impact of leader humility on employee outcomes. We believe our work is more informative by taking various control variables into account. This empirical contribution in turn leads to theoretical contribution too as altogether our finding suggests that leader humility is relationally beneficial and can be either genuine or instrumental, indicating the importance to study leader humility as a subject under leadership.

Managerial Implications

The results of current study have practical implications for business practitioners. First, we found that leader humility can facilitate employee constructive voice behavior by boosting their relational energy. Given that constructive voice behavior is beneficial to organizations, a straightforward recommendation is to encourage leaders to behave with humility when interacting with their subordinates. Leaders can demonstrate humble behavior by publicly praising subordinates, showing willingness to learn from others, and seeking advice from subordinates. Such behavior of leaders will energize employees to be confident and will provide them with a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness. This will mean that employees are more willing to perform proactively and engage in constructive voice behavior.

Second, from the perspective of human resource management, our findings of positive leader humility-constructive voice relationship suggest that leader humility contributes to employee's positive attitudes and behaviors at work. Researchers suggest that individual's expression of humility is modifiable, which can be enhanced through practice and training (Owens et al., 2015, p. 1204). Thus, we suggest that well-designed training programs can be used to help leaders to develop leader humility.

Third, our findings of perceived sincerity of leader humility as an important moderator call attention to a potential risk for humble leaders. That is, leader's humility must be sincere when interacting with followers because false humility such as empty praise or flattery does not motivate employees, in fact, it causes defensiveness and caution in followers (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Therefore, we encourage leaders to be trained to behave with humility or to continue behaving with humility, but to avoid demonstrating false or instrumental humility. Human resource management practitioners should consider that

compared with structural policies, employing humble leaders could be a costless strategy for promoting an engaged and energized workforce.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are still limitations of our present study. First, individual gains relational energy from multiple sources (Owens et al., 2016). Though a leader can be a major relational energizer at work (Owens et al., 2016), employees can obtain relational energy from other sources such as peers and friends. Therefore, when evaluating perceived relational energy, in addition to leader humility, employees may also consider these sources for clues. Future studies should test and replicate our model and integrate other sources with leader humility to predict employees' attitudes and behaviors. **Second, when measuring apparent sincerity of leader, we used the word "tries" (e.g., My immediate supervisor tries to show a genuine interest in other people). Such statements seem to denote that the leaders attempt to be sincere, but whether they are perceived to be truly sincere is unknown. Future research measuring perceived apparent sincerity should remove "tries" to avoid confusion and enhance internal validity. Third, although we included multiple control variables (e.g., empowerment, work engagement, and decision-making autonomy), we found most of them were not significantly related to voice behavior. A possible explanation is that when employees perceived higher empowerment, engagement, and autonomy, they can do their work independently and actively without speaking to their supervisors. Thus, employees' problem-solving capabilities could be an important factor worth considering. Future research should further examine this idea when studying voice behavior. Fourth, our study was limited in that it only examines a specific proactive behavior (i.e., employee constructive voice behavior) affected by leader humility. To improve organizational effectiveness, leader humility may also be relevant to other critical employee proactivity at work. In future studies, we recommend that a wide range of proactive behavior and OCB as outcomes of leader**

humility might be also explored. Fourth, in addition to results suggested in our study, there are other circumstances under which the effects of leader humility vary. For example, prior research suggests that CEO's expression of humility may be perceived to be weak (Ou et al., 2014), and humility could be not appropriate in such situations with time pressure or extreme threat (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Lastly, in terms of methodology, although our cross-unit design has strengths, it is limited in that the samples were from two organizations within the cultural context of China. Nevertheless, our strongly supported results imply that our proposed relationships should be potentially generalizable. Given the meaningfulness and importance of examining the relationship between leader humility and voice through the mechanism of relational energy, we recommend that future research should be conducted to affirm our findings and to explore whether industrial or cultural differences influence our proposed effects.

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Table 1

Study 1: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	S.D.									
Variables			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	29.57	4.98									
2. Gender	1.49	.47	-.16**								
3. Education	3.99	1.45	-.03	-.03							
4. Tenure	4.56	4.77	.72**	-.09*	-.03						
5. Self -efficacy	3.36	.64	.01	-.12**	.05	.07	(.83)				
6. Engagement	4.17	.50	-.05	-.13**	.02	-.05	.09	(.95)			
7. Leader Humility	4.05	.57	-.07	-.14**	.02	-.08	.12*	.57**	(.91)		
8. Perceived relational energy	3.97	.68	-.08	-.16**	-.01	-.09	.19**	.57**	.67**	(.89)	
9. Constructive voice	3.89	.66	-.08	.01	.06	-.10*	.07	.07	.15**	.22**	(.91)

Note. $n = 449$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Value of Cronbach's alpha are presented on the diagonal of the correlation matrix.

Table 2

Study 1: Structural Equation Modelling Results

	Relational Energy (T2)		Constructive voice (T3)	
	B(p)	S.E.	B(p)	S.E.
Control variables				
Self-Efficacy (T1)	.10** (.005)	.03	.03 (.634)	.06
Work Engagement (T1)	.36** (.000)	.06	-.15 (.121)	.10
Independent variable				
Leader Humility (T1)	.65** (.000)	.11	.01 (.936)	.11
Mediator				
Relational Energy (T2)			.29** (.006)	.10

Note. $n = 449$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3

Table 3

Study 2: Measurement Model Comparisons

Model	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	χ^2 (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df)
1). M ₀ – Hypothesized four-factor model (LH, AS, PRE, and Voice)	.06	.92	.91	.05	365.69*** (203)	—
2). M ₁ – Three-factor model (combine LH&AS, PRE, Voice)	.09	.87	.85	.09	491.65*** (206)	125.96*** (3)
3). M ₂ – Three-factor model (combine LH&PRE, AS, Voice)	.14	.67	.63	.11	926.86*** (206)	561.17*** (3) ^a
4). M ₃ – Three-factor model (combine AS&PRE, LH, Voice)	.09	.85	.83	.09	531.46*** (206)	165.77*** (3) ^a
5). M ₄ – Two-factor model (combine LH&AS, combine PRE&Voice)	.11	.78	.75	.10	687.07*** (207)	321.38*** (4) ^a
6). M ₅ – Two-factor model (combine LH&AS&PRE, Voice)	.15	.62	.58	.11	1026.91*** (208)	661.22*** (5) ^a
7). M ₆ – One-factor model (combine LH&AS&PRE&Voice)	.16	.52	.48	.14	1240.28*** (213)	874.59*** (10) ^a

Note. N=185.

RMSEA is Root-Mean Squared Error of Approximation, CFI is Comparative Fit Index, TLI is Tucker-Lewis Index, and SRMR is Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual. LH is leader humility, PRE is perceived relational energy, AS is apparent Sincerity of leader, and Voice is employee constructive voice behavior.

^aModel was compared with M₀

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4**Study 2: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	S.D.													
Variables			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Age	35.44	7.79													
2. Gender	1.35	.48	-.21**												
3. Education	2.12	1.73	.31**	-.06											
4. Tenure	14.42	9.34	.96**	-.22**	.35**										
5. Decision-Making Autonomy	4.02	.66	-.20**	.01	-.06	-.22**	(.81)								
6. Role-Breadth Self-Efficacy	3.94	.51	-.08	.04	-.08	-0.11	.15*	(.80)							
7. Work Engagement	4.49	.45	-.07	-.01	-.10	-.07	.26**	.36**	(.93)						
8. Empowering leadership	4.26	.47	-.06	-.15*	.02	-.05	.18*	.16*	.36**	(.87)					
9. Power distance	3.30	.62	.13	-.16*	.01	.09	.25**	.02	.26**	.12	(.73)				
10. Leader Humility	4.47	.48	-.16*	-.21**	.00	-.14	.04	.05	.30**	.57**	.04	(.91)			
11. Perceived Relational Energy	4.18	.54	-.23**	.00	.03	-.24**	.32**	.19*	.36**	.27**	.04	.36**	(.87)		
12. Apparent Sincerity	4.38	.56	-.11	-.07	-.15*	-.12	.32**	.14	.41**	.49**	.20**	.49**	.44**	(.74)	
13. Constructive Voice	4.01	.43	.07	-.04	.00	.05	.14	.11	.00	.02	.09	.10	.25**	.09	(.76)

Note. $n = 185$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Value of Cronbach's alpha are presented on the diagonal of the correlation matrix.

Table 5

Study 2: Structural Equation Modelling Results

	Relational Energy (T2)		Constructive voice (T3)	
	B(p)	S.E.	B(p)	S.E.
<i>Step 1</i>				
Control variables				
Role-Breadth Self-Efficacy (T1)	.03 (.853)	.15	.21 (.147)	.14
Work Engagement (T1)	.35** (.008)	.13	-.21 (.237)	.17
Decision-making Autonomy (T1)	.26** (.010)	.10	.21 (.060)	.11
Empowering Leadership (T1)	-.02 (.875)	.12	-.28 (.129)	.19
Independent variable				
Leader Humility (T1)	.37** (.000)	.10	.26 (.157)	.19
Mediator				
Relational Energy (T2)			.27** (.014)	.11
<i>Step 2</i>				
Moderator				
Apparent Sincerity (T1)	.28* (.015)	.11		
Power Distance (T1)	-.07 (.246)	.06		
Interaction effect				
Leader humility x Apparent Sincerity	.18* (.029)	.08		
Leader Humility x Power Distance	-.31 (.084)	.18		

Note. $n = 449$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3

Figure 1

Conceptual Model

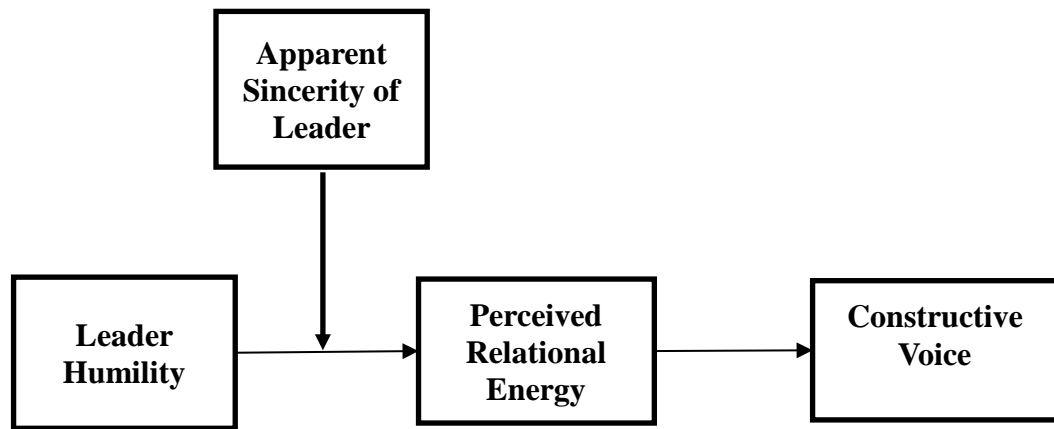
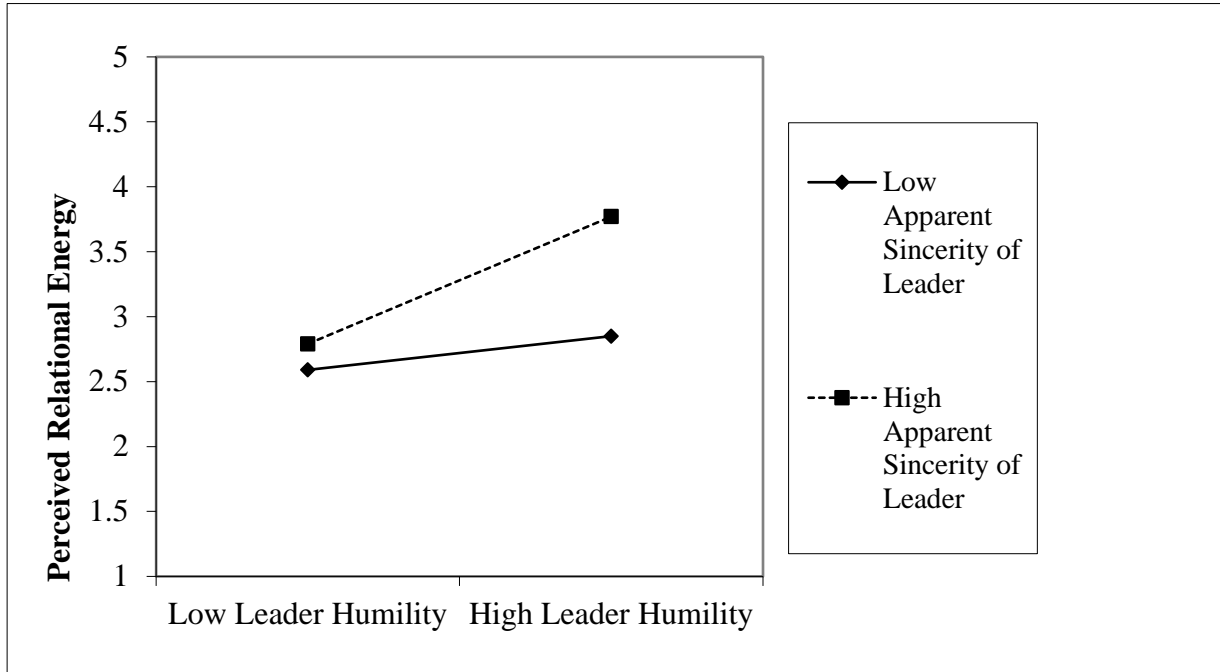


Figure 2

Study 2: Interaction Plot of Leader Humility and Apparent Sincerity of Leader in Predicting Perceived Relational Energy



Appendix: Scale Items of Measured Variables in Current Study

Leader humility (Owens & Hekman, 2015)

1. My immediate supervisor actively seeks feedback, even if it is critical.
2. My immediate supervisor admits it when he or she doesn't know how to do something.
3. My immediate supervisor acknowledges when others have more knowledge and skills than himself or herself.
4. My immediate supervisor takes notice of others' strengths.
5. My immediate supervisor often compliments others on their strengths.
6. My immediate supervisor shows appreciation for the unique contributions of others.
7. My immediate supervisor shows a willingness to learn from others.
8. My immediate supervisor shows he or she is open to the advice of others.
9. My immediate supervisor shows he or she is open to the ideas of others.

Perceived relational energy (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016)

1. I feel invigorated when I interact with my immediate supervisor.
2. After interacting with my immediate supervisor, I feel more energy to do my work.
3. I feel increased vitality when I interact with my immediate supervisor.
4. I would go to my immediate supervisor when I need to be "pepped up".
5. After an exchange with my immediate supervisor I feel more stamina to do my work.

Apparent sincerity of leader (adapted from Ferris et al. 2005)

1. When communicating with others, my immediate supervisor tries to be genuine in what he/she says and does.
2. My immediate supervisor thinks it is important that people believe he/she is sincere in what he/she says and does.
3. My immediate supervisor tries to show a genuine interest in other people.

Constructive voice behavior (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014)

1. He/she frequently makes suggestions about how to do things in new or more effective ways at work.
2. He/she often suggests changes to work projects in order to make them better.
3. He/she often speaks up with recommendations about how to fix work-related problems.
4. He/she frequently makes suggestions about how to improve work methods or practices.
5. He/she regularly proposes ideas for new or more effective work methods.